

Is Europe ready for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?

... not yet

Leida Rijnhout

By now most political decision makers and civil society organisations are aware of the new internationally agreed 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets is universal, which means it has to be fully implemented in Europe too. For many European policymakers, this is an unfamiliar situation, as they are not used to the United Nations (UN) setting goals and targets for domestic policies.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is quite comprehensive and touches on most of the relevant topics to achieve a better world for everyone including the protection of the planet. It has the potential to provoke a paradigm shift in the concept

of development as such, and stresses more than any other agenda the necessity to achieve coherence in policymaking. It promotes a new way of policy work, with less focus on end of pipe solutions, charity, incremental change and damage control. Instead, it gives much more space to systemic change, fighting the root causes of poverty, social exclusion and environmental degradation. Is the EU ready for this agenda? The author does not think so yet, and therefore explores crucial aspects of a necessary transformation to successfully implement the Agenda.

A short history of sustainable development

The very first Summit at UN level, where “environment” and “development” came together, took place in 1992, in Rio de Janeiro (UN Conference on Environment and Development, UNCED). This Summit generated international agreements and processes that are still very important for any sustainable development agenda, and was followed by 20 years of negotiations at the ministerial level.

1992 was a milestone in multilateral decision-making on sustainable development. It marked the moment when world leaders decided that our common problems need common and holistic solutions. On the national level, a dynamic started to translate sustainable development into national strategies with advisory councils engaging all relevant stakeholders in policy decisions and implementation. On the local level, a booming of Local Agenda 21 initiatives took place.

Figure 1: A Shift in Perspective: From MDGs to SDGs

MDGs	SDGs
Development	Sustainability
Focus on developing countries	Focus on all countries
Aid and Trade agenda	Human Rights and Justice – redistribution of wealth
No recognition of planetary boundaries	Living within the limits
Environment is luxury	Environment is basic for developing well-being

Source: Author’s own compilation

And how about Europe?

After UNCED, sustainable development was given recognition at the highest level of EU governance when it was included in the Treaty of Amsterdam as an overarching objective of EU policies. At the Gothenburg Summit in June 2001, EU leaders launched the first EU Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS), based on a proposal from the European Commission. In June 2006, after a consultation period of two years, the European Council adopted a renewed version of the SDS. Responding to the review, the European Council affirmed that sustainable development was a fundamental objective of the EU under the Lisbon Treaty. But these were mainly words and good intentions, as in reality, the SDS did not succeed. It has never enjoyed the same priority as the Europe 2020 Strategy which aims at economic growth. Growth remains more important than social rights, reducing the share of natural resources from the Global South or a better protection of the environment. By the end of 2011, the European Council was due to decide on when a comprehensive review of the SDS should be undertaken. But it never happened, as vested corporate interests were more important for the Commission.

A new era? The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

A new momentum on sustainable development was generated by the Rio+20 Summit in 2012. In its final document “The Future We Want”, the idea of drafting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was included. The UN established an Open Working Group which, with strong civil society participation and through monthly meetings, drafted the 17 SDGs (including 169 targets). This inclusive process was particularly helpful for creating ownership of this agenda. It was later on an obvious decision to merge this process with the follow up of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be expired in 2015. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the 2030 Agenda is based upon the Rio Process with its many internationally-agreed principles and recommendations.

The good news is that the 2030 Agenda goes far beyond the traditional North/South agenda, where rich countries help the poor. Instead, it recognises that unsustainable lifestyles and policies in the Global North directly affect social and environmental issues in the Global South.

The ecological debt of the North

Looking at global financial and material flows, it does not go without notice that there is a flow from the

Global South, rich in natural resources, towards industrialised countries. Lifestyles in the Global North are thus built on those resources. Their accumulation since colonial times is known as “ecological debt”. This concept was presented for the first time at the UNCED conference in 1992, when non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from Chile presented “the world” the bill of their health costs due to the hole in the ozone layer mainly caused by the Global North. The Dutch economist Lou Keune calculated the monetary value of this ecological debt, concluding that the overconsumption of resources of industrialised countries amounted to US\$ 5,655 billion per year, roughly 100 times the amount of official development aid (which then amounted to US\$ 56 billion per year). This means that the Global South could be better off with less export-dependent economies as the exploitation of its natural resources and the use of its territories to the benefit of industrialized countries is blocking its own development as well as its food security.

While the methodology of putting a price on nature is debatable, it is obvious that an active process of enrichment and impoverishment is going on that needs to be tackled urgently. The huge challenge for the EU is, of course, how to do this. Existing policy proposals, like the Circular Economy Package, are a step in the right direction, but nowhere enough to reach the targets needed. Trade policies and bilateral trade agreements, often not mentioned when talking about sustainable development (and not included in the SDGs!), can be a driving force for unsustainable practices and undermine the whole agenda – as is the case with the interregional free-trade agreements TTIP and CETA deals currently on the table. Furthermore, the negative external effects of domestic policies, e.g. in agricultural or financial policies, should be rethought with reference to the SDGs.

The EU as a developing region

Even though the EU is one of the regions with the highest living standards worldwide, for many people, their individual situation is not optimal and needs improvement. According to European Commission (COM(2014) 130 final/2), the number of people living at risk of poverty in the EU has increased by 10 million to 124 million from 2009 to 2013. At the same time, income inequalities have risen, with the top 20% earning 5.1 times as much as the bottom 20% in 2012. The unemployment rate increased from 7.1% in 2008 to 10.9% in 2013. Massive unemployment and high poverty undermines the social foundation and credibility of the EU.

Health issues paint an equally negative picture. The number of people suffering from chronic diseases such as diabetes, asthma and dementia is continuously increasing. More than half of the European population (52%) are overweight, while 17% are

obese, one third of workers deal with depression and 83% with isolation and loneliness caused by stress at work. Meanwhile air pollution is becoming one of the biggest killers in Europe.

Therefore, domestic issues such as improving labour conditions, good education and health security are also core for this Agenda, if we want to move Europe towards a more socially just place where no one feels excluded. Furthermore, Europe must address its own “ecological footprint”, including by reducing its use of resources in absolute amounts by at least 80% and similar amounts for CO₂ emissions.

What to expect from the European Union?

The Europe 2020 strategy is considered as being the primary strategy guiding Europe’s development path towards a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy. But a closer look shows that the Europe 2020 strategy is very fragmented concerning sustainability and guided by vested corporate interests. It can not be considered a sustainable development strategy, given its clear focus on competition, economic growth, and lack of both an external dimension and any recognition of planetary boundaries. Commission President Juncker’s ten “priorities” are even more limited and have even less connection with sustainability.

Therefore, the important task for the EU is to develop a real Strategy on Sustainable Development for 2030, including a concrete plan for implementing all 17 SDGs and 169 targets. These targets have to be broken down and contextualised. On several goals, the EU is already doing well (e.g. education, labour standards, water and sanitation), but on others it is not. A gap analysis by the European Commission, on the request of Vice President Timmermans, is supposed to identify incoherencies and policy areas in which the EU needs to increase its ambitions. A communication on the results of this mapping exercise is expected by the end of November 2016. But even without the exercise being completed, it is fair to say that several existing policies of the EU are not compatible with the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The following specifies the most important policy areas of the EU in which systemic change is needed in order to be fit for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The problem of externalities

Coherence in internal and external policies is decisive. The cross-border impacts of European internal policies should therefore be taken into account. A lot needs to be done here, as it is clear that European consumption and production patterns are harmful to the Global South. As explained before, the majority of the natural resources we use comes from countries outside Europe. For agricultural goods and services

alone, the EU needs 269 million hectares, of which 43% are outside its borders. Europe uses that land, often appropriated through land grabbing, to feed its animals, and for other non-food purposes, like bio-energy, cotton and bioplastics. Not only can this land not be used for local food production. Often, this export-oriented agriculture also goes hand in hand with erosion, water extraction, the loss of biodiversity and the displacement of local communities. These “externalities” of European lifestyle are far from being compatible with poverty eradication and food security in the Global South. The EU should start to set land, water, and carbon footprint reduction targets, combined with the implementation of measurements and monitoring tools.

Moreover, a tax shift from labour to resource use would be an incentive to invest less in resource-intensive products, and would also create more jobs. Targets for biofuels as an alternative to fossil fuels should be lowered. Biofuels need too much fertile soil that should be used for food production. Instead, more emphasis should be put on energy efficiency and most of all on sufficiency (using capping schemes).

Financial and tax policies

Europe should be more serious in tackling illicit financial flows, secret tax deals and tax havens. The Lux Leaks and Panama papers clearly showed the involvement of European companies, and preference policies from Member States to those companies to allow them not to pay their taxes. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates that developing countries lose at least €100 billion per year due to corporate tax avoidance.

Governance for sustainable development

Achieving sustainable development is not a matter of doing more of the same. This means no “business-as-usual” or “policy-as-usual”, but also no “governance-as-usual”. The EU as well as national governments need to develop different ways of governance where the priorities are set right, and where the decision making is done in a more holistic and coherent way and with full participation of civil society organisations. Sustainable development means a paradigm shift in thinking and acting. Especially as the 2030 Agenda is a highly political one, related to unfair power relations and in favour of redistribution of wealth, more democracy and transparency should be institutionalised.

On the European Commission level, it is necessary that a structure is set up between the different Directorates General to check all policies for coherence. Sustainability impact assessment tools should be developed, and joint policy actions could be promoted. At the Council level, we have already seen experiences with the so called “Jumbo” meetings on external representation, where ministries of environment and development discuss their joint positions on the SDG

agenda at the UN level, but we need to expand this to other Jumbo-meetings between ministries of foreign affairs, trade and environment to guarantee coherence on internal policies too.

Civil society participation is key for a successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Therefore an open and transparent structure should be set up to facilitate such participation, based on the self-organising principle and covering all relevant stakeholders. For the moment, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is not fit for that purpose, as it does not cover many groups, and does not represent civil society organisations.

Many civil society organisations have organised themselves and launched “SDG Watch Europe” in mid-October 2016. This new alliance consists of more than 80 civil society organisations from a variety of sectors including environment, development, labour, education, disabled issues, culture, and cooperatives, with the aim of making the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development a reality.

Infinite economic growth on a finite planet?

It is impossible to maintain the ambition for infinite growth, as is provided for in the Europe 2020 strategy, with social and environmental justice. That is the main reason why we should rethink the future of Europe, based on sustainability, within and outside its borders. The 2030 Agenda gives political leverage for this. The EU is already more than 70% dependent on imported energy, has few rare minerals and is the world’s main consumer of productive land outside its borders. Climate change, land grabbing and resource wars are causing poverty in the Global South, also provoking flows of migrants, including to Europe.

This all needs to change, and for that the focus on a transition into a new economic model is the only option. This is what is referred to as a “post-growth” society. It involves elaborating a collective proposal for a future in which the economy and society would no longer be dependent (or locked in) on the need for an infinite increase of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Instead the focus would shift to wellbeing, the redistribution of wealth and a fair use of resources. This means a re-direction of policies that are not solely focused on GDP growth, but take into account the externalities of our consumption and production patterns, thereby using a dashboard of indicators that also represent wellbeing, the state of our envi-

ronment and public health. It also means a redirection of investments: more sustainable infrastructure and spatial planning that allows for instance sustainable transport and public spaces, as well as research and innovation to promote other business models that allow sharing, leasing and repairing.

A new narrative for Europe

A more positive European agenda for the implementation of the SDGs, that ensures wellbeing and democratic participation for all citizens would also help to convince Eurosceptics to believe again in working together at the European level, where solidarity, human rights and environmental protection are seen as core values. The EU and its Member States have to demonstrate political leadership to take this 2030 Agenda implementation further, to start internal processes to make decision making more coherent and holistic, to get out of their comfort zones, and to put their priorities right.

Author

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Further reading and links

EPSC Strategic Note: Sustainability Now, a European Vision for Sustainability, by Karl Falkenberg, Issue 18, July 2016.

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